

REVIEW

Mike Hill

Cedric Watts, *Covert Plots in Literary and Critical Texts: From William Shakespeare to Edward Said*.
London: Anthem Press, 2021

Cedric Watts is Emeritus Professor of English at the University of Sussex in the UK, and he has a particular expertise in Graham Greene. His 1994 book *A Preface to Greene* is as good an introduction to Greene as there is in print, while his many talks at the annual Graham Greene International Festival in Berkhamsted have always combined closely argued analysis with a liveliness of presentation. His field is not confined to Greene, however; he has written on Keats and Hardy, and he has a particular interest in Shakespeare and Conrad. His latest volume reflects this breadth of interest.

Covert plots are one of Watts's ongoing literary interests, and he has written on them before. Every narrative, he explains, has an overt plot—the one immediately obvious to the reader—but many have a concealed plot-sequence that may only become evident on re-reading. In many cases, the covert plot is intentional on the part of the author, but this is not always the case. And in most cases, Watts contends, working out the covert plot will enhance the narrative for the reader. This may sound a little dry, but Cedric Watts's latest collection of pieces fizzles with interesting ideas, and his astonishing scholarship is worn lightly.

Here are essays on twelve works, from H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* to Golding's *Pincher Martin*, and including some analysis of critical works by

Roland Barthes, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Edward Said. Each essay is engaging even when the work in question is new to the reader. His discussion of Joseph Conrad's *Secret Agent* is particularly good, with its covert plot of a group of—Watts argues—Jewish conspirators threatening the peace and order of London. On *Waiting for Godot*, he comments that it is a play that “ensnares and mocks commentators” before explaining his own understanding of it—that while the overt plot is atheistic, the covert plot is anti-theistic, that is, claiming that God does exist but is malevolent, callous, or indifferent.

For those specifically interested in Greene, there are essays here on two novels. On *Stamboul Train*—Watts calls it “that vivid and intense novel”—the focus is on Jewish characteristics explored in the book and the notion that Dr. Czinner is a man of Jewish heritage. On *The Power and the Glory*, which on re-reading, Watts finds “better than ever,” the covert plot concerns the whisky priest and his saintly effect on others in contrast to his apparent and self-declared failure. There is too, in that essay, a consideration of a briefer covert plot: the question of just how Coral Fellows died.

If you have ever read a novel or short story and been aware of loose ends or elements that do not seem central to the plot, it may be that you have sensed a covert plot. Cedric Watts's splendid essays may embolden you to explore a bit further.

Mike Hill is a retired teacher. He edits *A Sort of Newsletter*, the quarterly magazine of the Graham Greene Birthplace Trust. He is currently organizing his sixth Graham Greene Festival, to be held in Berkhamsted in September 2021. The 2011 volume *Dangerous Edges of Graham Greene* included his essay “Greene and Hitchcock.” He has co-authored with Jon Wise two books on Greene: *The Works of Graham Greene: A Reader’s Bibliography & Guide* (Continuum, 2012) and *The Works of Graham Greene Volume 2: A Guide to the Graham Greene Archives* (Bloomsbury, 2015).